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ENVIRONMENT, NOT WAR, IS THE REAL THREAT

Fibi Munene interviews  
Dr Norman Myers

KENYA, IDRC -- Dr Norman Myers is something of a rarity among environmentalists, he is a determined optimist. Not for him the "nightmarish vision" of a planet on the road to ruin. The former schoolteacher believes that we are still in control of our affairs, that the situation can be saved. But he admits that we don't have much time left.

In order to motivate people, it is important to accentuate the positive, he says. People are tired of hearing doom-and-gloom from environmentalists. If you can present environment, food, population or natural resources issues as challenges rather than as problems, the response from citizens and governments is likely to be positive."

Born in Britain, Myers adopted Kenya as his home 20 years ago. Wildlife conservation is particularly close to his heart. In his book "The Long African Day", he argued that the survival of Africa's wild animals is in everyone's interest. His latest book, "The Sinking Ark", lists many vanishing species, and in it attempts to show that preserving many of these species may contribute to the stability of ecosystems, and improvements in agriculture, industry and medicine.

The disappearance of animal and plant species is the most significant form of environmental degradation, he says, because when a species vanishes, it is gone forever.

Some of these lost species could be the key to new drugs to fight diseases like cancer, or natural sources of petroleum oils, or survival plants that can help rehabilitate deserts.

In his books, his lectures, and as an adviser to governments and UN agencies, Dr Myers stresses that environmental issues are not local issues. Ours is an interdependent global community. What happens in the developing countries affects the people of the developed countries, and vice versa.

He gives an example. The tropical moist forests are being destroyed in Central America and elsewhere to make way for cattle ranches to supply cheap beef for North Americans and Europeans. One of the consequences of burning the forests, says Dr Myers, is increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which could radically alter climates in the temperate zone in the next 50 years, bringing drier, warmer weather, and reducing the capacity of the north to produce grain.

Food, population, energy, tropical forests and other problems are all interrelated. To those in the rich nations who believe that it is not their problem, Dr Myers says "That is like saying that your end of the boat is sinking, so it's none of my concern. We are all in the same boat." And he says the same to those in the developing nations who take the attitude that "if we want to chop down our forests tomorrow, that is our business."

Some countries, such as Thailand and the Philippines, which have lost a lot of their forest cover, are now learning that if they continue to convert their trees into foreign exchange by cutting and selling their timber indiscriminately, they will face serious environmental costs.

Already these countries are finding that floods and landslides are increasing, and the miracle rice crops of the "green revolution" are failing for lack of irrigation water. The reason for all this is that the forests on the hillsides are gone, and the watersheds have been disturbed.

In Kenya, forests have been reduced by half within the past five years, Dr Myers claims, and although the government is now encouraging people to plant trees, it will be 10 years before those trees are big enough to supply fuelwood. The time to have started a tree planting campaign, he says, was in the 1970s. If you wait until the problems are so obvious, he adds, it takes much longer to correct them. It may even be too late.

He has no doubts as to who is to blame for environmental destruction in developing countries. The very rich and the very poor are to blame. The rich who insist on their cheap, grainfed beef, and the poor who are forced into ever more fragile ecological zones as a result of the pressures of population

In spite of all this Myers remains an optimist. The solutions, he believes, are for the developing countries to attempt to assert their economic independence more than they have in the past, through the proposed New International Economic Order; and to adopt innovative forms of agriculture to make themselves self sufficient in food. If they do not, he says, they will remain forever dependent on the good will of the developed countries.

Developing countries can make the leap required to meet the basic needs of their people. This is being demonstrated by countries as diverse as China, Costa Rica, Singapore and Taiwan. But to do so will require determination and the political will to overcome delicate problems like land reform and distribution of national wealth.

For their part, the developed nations must be prepared to enter into a real North-South dialogue. "This is not just a case of more foreign aid, but a question of everybody contributing in the best way they can for the long-term benefit of the global community. There should be more transfer of technology between east and west as well as north and south."

Unfortunately, adds Dr Myers, the developed nations seem more concerned with increasing their arms capacity than with environmental factors which, he says, constitute the real threat to global stability.

"And this is wrong, because there are no two sets of problems, one for the developed nations and the other for the developing nations. There are only global problems."

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